



71.1965.1 Sisters of the Holy Cross, Civil War Nurses, 1861-1865
St. Joseph County
Marker Text Review Report
06/17/2013

Marker Text

In response to Governor Morton's call of 1861, eighty Sisters of the Holy Cross under the leadership of Mother Angela served as military nurses. The Sisters became the forerunners of the Navy Nurse Corps in 1862 when they boarded the Red Rover, the navy's first hospital ship.

Report

The majority of the marker text is correct, but primary sources are lacking regarding the Sisters' service at various hospitals. While more research is needed, the following report provides contextual information about the need for nurses, specifically Sisters, as well as the role of hospital boats in the Civil War.

According to Peggy Brase Seigel's 1990 *Indiana Magazine of History* [article](#), while visiting Indiana Civil War hospitals and camps to supply soldiers, Governor [Oliver P. Morton](#) witnessed poor medical treatment and general negligence, convincing him that "systematically organized medical care should be greatly expanded."¹ Primary and secondary sources confirm that this expansion included the Sisters of the Holy Cross, St. Mary's Academy, Notre Dame.²

In *Nuns of the Battlefield*, Ellen Ryan Jolly states that while more than eighty sisters served, the War Department recorded only sixty-three.³ Governor Morton requested that the Sisters first report to Paducah, Kentucky.⁴ The Sisters also served at hospitals in Tennessee and Illinois. According to Jolly, the Sisters that served at the Mound City Hospital in Illinois encountered 1,000-14,000 wounded soldiers.⁵ Jolly states that although some of the wounded were prisoners of war, to the Sisters "there was no distinction of North and South in the wards of the soldiers."⁶

In [memoirs](#) regarding his time as a surgeon at Mound City Hospital, Dr. John H. Brinton noted a concern common in the Civil War period that civilian women were unsuited to serve as nurses.⁷ Dr. Brinton lamented that female nurses produced "nothing but complaints . . . This female nurse business was a great trial to all the men concerned, and to me at Mound City soon became intolerable."⁸ As a result of this debate, Dr. Brinton successfully solicited the help of the Sisters of the Holy Cross at Mound City Hospital.⁹ He praised their humility and ability to quickly assume nursing skills, stating "the sick patients gained by the change."¹⁰ Dr. Brinton implied that the public initially considered the employment of Sisters as nurses controversial, stating that "for a few days I was the most abused man in that department, for the newspapers gave me no mercy."¹¹

The marker text correctly states that Mother Angela Gillespie served as a Civil War nurse and led other Sisters in service as nurses. Sources such as the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* and the *Life of Charles Henry Davis, Rear Admiral, 1807-1877* verify that after service at stationary hospitals, Sister Angela volunteered the help of the Sisters on the USS



71.1965.1 Sisters of the Holy Cross, Civil War Nurses, 1861-1865
St. Joseph County
Marker Text Review Report
06/17/2013

Red Rover.¹² In a June 20, 1862 letter, Flag Officer C.H. Davis, U.S. Navy, Western Flotilla, wrote that Sister Angela, “has kindly offered the services of the sisters for the hospital boat of this squadron when needed.”¹³

The *Red Rover* was a ship that served as a “floating hospital,” caring for wounded soldiers and transporting them to nearby hospitals.¹⁴ The Sisters’ duties, particularly when serving on the floating hospital boat *USS Red Rover*, consisted of cleaning, laundering, administering medicine, nourishing the sick and providing “spiritual comfort for patients.”¹⁵ Judith E. Harper states that these floating hospitals “were critical to the survival of fallen Union soldiers in the aftermath of battles.”¹⁶ Hospital vessels often rescued fallen soldiers from swamps and rivers.¹⁷ The Sisters of the Holy Cross traveled on the Mississippi River aboard the *Red Rover*, collecting injured soldiers, caring for them aboard the ship and depositing them at hospitals in Memphis, Mound City and Cairo.¹⁸ The *Red Rover* attempted to reach Vicksburg, the “[City of the Siege](#)”; after witnessing a boat blockade and firing at Vicksburg, the Sisters helped “lift the bruised and broken soldiers from rivers of blood.”¹⁹

While secondary sources state that the Sisters of the Holy Cross were the forerunners of the Navy Nurse Corps, the Navy Nurse Corps Association makes no mention of the Sisters on their [website](#), nor does the U.S. Navy in their “Navy Medicine Commemorates Nurse Corps’ 105th Birthday.”²⁰ Although the service of Sisters aboard the *Red Rover* can be substantiated, the claim that the *Red Rover* was the Navy’s first hospital ship cannot be. IHB now avoids the use of subjective and superlative terms such as ‘first,’ ‘best,’ and ‘most.’ Such claims are often not verifiable and/or require extensive qualification to be truly accurate.

For Further Information

The National Archives has records of the Adjutant General’s Office and the Surgeon General’s Office that describe the role of female nurses in the Civil War and may contain information about the Sisters’ involvement. Peggy Brase Seigel describes on page 9 of *She Went to War* that “Alphabetical card files entitled ‘Hospital Attendants, Matrons and Nurses, 1861-1865’ record hospital assignments from muster rolls and payrolls. Records for Union military hospitals included in ‘Monthly Returns of Nurses, 1861-1865’ contain lists of women employed as nurses in military hospitals; and invalid pension applications filed either for women nurses or for their husbands yield invaluable biographical information for sixteen of Indiana’s Civil War nurses.”

For an image and description of the “Hospital Ward on Board USS Rover,” Mother Angela Gillespie and the USS Red Rover, see <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/prs-tpic/nurses/nrs-a.htm>.

For information about the Sisters of the Holy Cross, see the [Archives and Records of the Sisters of the Holy Cross](#).



71.1965.1 Sisters of the Holy Cross, Civil War Nurses, 1861-1865
St. Joseph County
Marker Text Review Report
06/17/2013

For more information about floating hospital ships and the *Red Rover*, see Judith E. Harper, [Women During the Civil War, an Encyclopedia](#) (New York: Routledge, 2004). Also see "Gunboat Mound City Hit; Scalded Sailors aboard Hospital Ship," *Jacksonville Journal-Courier* (June 24, 1962), IHB Marker File 71.1965.1.

For more about the *USS Red Rover* see Steven Lewis Roca, "[Presence and Precedents: The USS Red Rover during the American Civil War, 1861-1865](#)," *Civil War History* (June 1998): 91-110.

For additional Navy records, including correspondence, see 80.2.1 General Records, [Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Navy, 1804-1950](#), General Records of the Department of the Navy, 1798-1947, National Archives.

¹ Peggy Brase Seigel, "She Went to War: Indiana Women Nurses in the Civil War," *Indiana Magazine of History* 86 (March 1990): 16.

² Ibid. Ellen Ryan Jolly, L.L.D., [Nuns of the Battlefield](#) (Providence: The Providence Visitor Press, 1927): 124-157; Kate Dooley, "Pioneers of the Navy Nurse Corps," *Ave Maria* (August 11, 1962): 30.; Jolly, 126-128.

In October 1861, Governor Morton sent a letter to the Very Reverend Edward Sorin, the Superior of the Sisters, requesting that they serve as nurses. On page 127-128, Jolly provides a transcription of a letter from the Very Rev. Edward Sorin, C.S.C., the Superior of the Sisters, stating that the Governor requested their help nursing soldiers. Locating Governor Morton's letter to Rev. Sorin lies outside of the scope of this project. It is possible that the records are located at the Archives and Records Department of the Sisters of the Holy Cross or at the Indiana State Archives' [Governor Oliver P. Morton Telegraph Books](#).



71.1965.1 Sisters of the Holy Cross, Civil War Nurses, 1861-1865
St. Joseph County
Marker Text Review Report
06/17/2013

³ Jolly, 155.; Director of Archives and Records at the Sisters of the Holy Cross at Notre Dame, Sister Jeanette Fettig, C.S.C., cited Jolly's estimation. A transcribed list of the Sisters who served is available in *Nuns of the Battlefield* and in the marker file, given to the IHB by Sister Fettig ("Holy Cross Sisters in the Civil War," Notes by Sister John Francis, Archives and Records, Sisters of the Holy Cross, Notre Dame).

⁴ Jolly, 128.

Reportedly, Sister Angela and the other Sisters first arrived at Cairo, Illinois and met with General Grant before traveling to Paducah (Jolly, 128. See page 128-130 for a description of the meeting of General Grant and the Sisters).; While Rev. Sorin states the Sisters should first report to Paducah, sources conflict about where the Sisters served and the chronology in which they did so. Secondary sources cite various cities in which the Sisters worked, including Memphis, Tennessee; Paducah and Louisville, Kentucky; and Cairo and Mound City, Illinois (Sister M. John Francis, C.S.C., "U.S. General Hospital at Mound City Played Important Role in Civil War," *Cairo Evening Citizen*, April 20, 1961.; Seigel, 16.; Jolly, 128). Further research is necessary to clarify their journey to multiple hospitals and camps).

⁵ Jolly, 133.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Personal Memoirs of John H. Brinton, Major and Surgeon U.S.V., 1861-1865* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1914): 44.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 45.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² C.H. Davis, Flag Officer, U.S. Navy, Western Flotilla to Sir [W. McGunnege?], *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 178.; *Life of Charles Henry Davis, Real Admiral, 1807-1877*, 246-247.

¹³ C.H. Davis, Flag Officer, U.S. Navy, Western Flotilla to "Sir," *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series I, vol. 23 of *Naval Forces on Western Waters* (U.S. Naval War Records Office, April 12, 1862-December 31, 1862): 177.; Davis asked First Master A.M. Grant to place gun fragments (to be remade into a statue), presumably from the *USS Red Rover*, "at the disposal of Sister Angela, superior of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, who are the principal nurses in our



71.1965.1 Sisters of the Holy Cross, Civil War Nurses, 1861-1865
St. Joseph County
Marker Text Review Report
06/17/2013

military hospitals” (Commodore C.H. Davis, U.S. Navy, Commanding Western Flotilla to First Master A.M. Grant, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series I, vol. 23 of *Naval Forces on Western Waters* (U.S. Naval War Records Office, April 12, 1862-December 31, 1862): 365).

¹⁴ Judith E. Harper, [*Women During the Civil War: An Encyclopedia*](#) (New York: Routledge, 2004): 199.

¹⁵ “Presence and Precedents: The USS Red Rover during the American Civil War, 1861-1865,” *Civil War History* (June 1988): 93.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Anne L. Austin, “Nurses in American History: Wartime Volunteers: 1861-1865,” *The American Journal of Nursing* 75, no. 5 (May 1975): 817.

¹⁸ Jolly, 142. For a list of those Sisters who served, see “Sisters of the Holy Cross Who Served on the Red Rover,” given to the IHB by Sister Jeanette Fetting.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The following sources state that the Sisters were the forerunners to the Navy Nurse Corps: Sr. Mary Denis Maher, CSA, Ph.D., “Holy Cross Sisters Forerunners of the Navy Nurse Corps,” *Navy Medicine* 99, no. 3 (May-June, 2008): 22.; “Pioneers of the Navy Nurse Corps,” 30.; “Presence and Precedents,” 105.; Valerie A. Kremer, “Navy Medicine Commemorates Nurse Corps’ 105th Birthday,” United States Navy, May 10, 2013, http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=74042.